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Long-Standing Nonkin Relationships of Older Adults in the Netherlands and the United States

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The main research questions of this study were (1) How long have adults in the Netherlands and the United States known members of their nonkin networks? (2) What are the predictors of long-standing nonkin relationships? and (3) Which predictors are recognizable in both societies? The data came from the NESTOR-LSN survey (3,229 adults aged 55 to 89 years in the Netherlands) and from the Northern California Community Study ($n = 1,050$, with 225 respondents aged 55 to 91 years in the United States). In both countries, the duration of nonkin relationships was related to the absence of network-disturbing variables (e.g., the number of years since the last move), network-sustaining variables (e.g., distance to nonkin), and other network properties (e.g., homogeneity). Nationally based differences were also observed (e.g., having a car was related to stable relationships only in the United States, and the special integrative functions of exclusive friendships were elicited only in Europe).

Keywords: *social integration; cross-cultural; duration; nonkin relationships*

Ah, how good it feels! The hand of an old friend.

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Yes'm, old friends is always best, 'less you can catch a new one that's fit to make an old one out of.

—Sarah Orne Jewett

Long-standing nonkin relationships, with their built-in convergence of experiences, can supply individuals with ties for ongoing integration in

society and can be enduring avenues for avoiding and alleviating loneliness. It is in the areas of reducing tension, socialization, and integration, including the reaffirmation of an individual's personal worth, that friendship and, to a certain extent, long-term relationships with neighbors can play the most significant role (Cantor 1979). Kin relationships can only partially compensate for the absence of long-term relationships with friends, neighbors, and other nonkin. Older adults characterized by only kin relations are reported to be lonelier than older adults with varied social networks of kin and nonkin relationships (Dykstra 1990). This underlines the salience of nonkin relationships for older adults' well-being.

Background

Classical Conceptual Perspectives

At least three classical views of personal relationships bear on the issue of relationship duration. First, Kahn and Antonucci (1980), in introducing the concept of a person's life-course convoy of supportive relationships, differentiated between the size, connectedness, stability, and duration of memberships in the convoy. People who change roles (e.g., by passing through phases of life) will face the disappearance of members of the convoy who were role dependent. Sooner or later, they will be replaced by others (new neighbors, new colleagues). The inner circle of the convoy consists primarily of stable, highly valued relationships that persist despite occupational or geographical changes. An old friend who now lives far away and is seen only rarely may nevertheless be the person to whom one turns in a crisis (Kahn and Antonucci 1980).

Weiss (1974) is a leading proponent of attachment theory, a second classical perspective for understanding relationships. He believes that there are

Authors' Note: Part of the data for this study were collected in the context of the research program Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults. This research program is conducted at the Department of Sociology and Social Gerontology, and the Department of Social Research Methodology at Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, and the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute in the Hague. The research is supported by a program grant from the Netherlands Program for Research on Ageing, funded by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences and the Ministry of Health, Welfare, and Sports. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jenny de Jong Gierveld, Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute, P.O. Box 11650, 2502 AR, The Hague, the Netherlands; e-mail: gierveld@nidi.nl.

different provisions of relationships (e.g., attachment, a sense of worth), each associated with a specific type and duration of relationships. Weiss argues that from nonkin, we can obtain the guidance we need during stressful situations.

Litwak and Szelenyi (1969) provided a third classical perspective: the structural-functional approach. They argued that each type of relationship has its own areas in which it can serve our needs better than others. For short-term emergencies, in-town or nearby family members and neighbors play the most important role. Litwak and Szelenyi saw friends as valuable for intermediate-length problems. Friendships are bound together by positive affect and by tasks that require the closest manifest agreement and moderately long-term involvement.

Weiss (1974), as well as Kahn and Antonucci (1980), largely ignored cultural variations in their analyses. The structural-functional approach, however, sees societies as having structures and functions that need to mesh together and that may change over time.

Cultural Differences Between the Netherlands and the United States

Since the mid-20th century, a series of noteworthy sociological and journalistic books, including *The Lonely Crowd* (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 1950), *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Slater 1970), and *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000), have examined the nature of U.S. society with special reference to the social relationships of its members. Harking back to the view of de Tocqueville (1835/2004), people living in the United States may form relationships readily: "Two Americans are at once friends simply because they are Americans." Yet a key, recurring theme among the aforementioned 20th-century authors has been the unfulfilling, often ephemeral, nature of social lives in the United States. Social analysts have implicated geographical mobility, inner-city high-rise buildings, commuting times, and the competitive nature of society as possible factors leading to this state.

Johnson and Mullins (1987) and Rifkin (2004) suggested that individualistic communities, such as the ones in North America, are less oriented toward social integration than communities in Europe. Rokach et al. (2001) depicted social relationships in North America as oriented toward individual achievement and impersonal relationships. Social relationships in European countries have been shown to be oriented toward social integration and social support (Van Tilburg et al. 1998). Consistent with the differing views of social life in the United States and various European countries, residents

of the United States are more prone to loneliness than people living in the Netherlands (Brehm et al. 2002:402).

Even the way people define friendship varies. Adams, Blieszner, and de Vries (2000) found that U.S. adults were more apt to see it as involving shared activities, whereas Canadians emphasized affective bonds. Thus, many relationships qualify as friendships in the United States. In contrast, in Western European societies, friendship appears to be defined in a more restrictive manner, with a greater discrimination being made between friendships involving intimate ties and more casual acquaintances (Höllinger and Haller 1990). The importance attached to friends and other nonkin relationships may differ. In Litwak and Szelenyi's (1969) data, Hungarians were 50% more likely to believe that they could get short-term help from neighbors than were Americans. This raises the possibility that neighbors are more important in the nonkin networks of Europeans than in those of Americans.

Thus, a picture emerges of U.S. men and women being more emotionally independent and preferring less demanding relationships, whereas European men and women are presumed to build more reciprocally dependent relationships, including many with neighbors. Although these differences have seldom been the focal point of studies, country differences in orientation toward social integration and the duration of long-standing nonkin relationships must be taken into consideration.

Earlier Work on Long-Standing Relationships

Here, the interest is in the duration of relationships with nonkin network members. Long-standing friendships tend to be rated more positively than newly formed friendships (Mendelson and Aboud 1999), and, at least among residents of one retirement community, old friends are loved more than new ones (Shea, Thompson, and Blieszner 1988). Ferrand and Mournier (1996) indicated that "friendships formed in childhood or youth, have a high chance of lasting if the partners enjoy a degree of convergence in the course of their respective life-cycles" (p. 286). Schutz (1967) conceptualized these lifelong bonds as *consociates*: In growing older together, people are supposed to partake of each other's inner time. Empirical evidence shows that the longevity of bonds is determined by personal factors on one hand (Geers, Reilley, and Dember 1998) and external constraints, such as geographical mobility, entering and leaving a position in the labor market (de Jong Gierveld and Dykstra 1993), and starting or ending partner relationships (Morgan, Neal, and Carder 1996) on the other.

Several longitudinal surveys have investigated the extent of stability in social networks. Examples include the study of Morgan et al. (1996) among recently widowed women; a 10-year panel study among women who returned to school in midlife (Suitor and Keeton 1997); two investigations 10 years apart of residents of Toronto (Wellman et al. 1997); a three-wave, 4-year longitudinal study among older adult men and women (Van Tilburg 1998); and the three-wave study by Van Duijn, Van Busschbach, and Snijders (1999) that included four subgroups: retired men, women expecting their first babies, people who had recently moved, and randomly selected community members. Each of the studies concluded that some network members are likely to be named in every elicitation of the network. The "persistent core" (Suitor, Wellman, and Morgan 1997) of the convoy encompasses "ascribed" relationships within the family and kinship and "acquired" relationships with friends, neighbors, and others.

Men and women in the oldest age groups report older social networks and fewer proximal social relationships than younger people (Ajrouch, Blandon, and Antonucci 2005). Not surprisingly, as people age, the duration of their relationships has been shown to increase, but in general, it does so at a slower pace than the increase in age (Ferrand and Mounier 1996). Laumann (1973) found that ethnoreligious homogeneity was associated with having known friends longer. He reported that the density of a network (e.g., how many of one's network members have relationships with one another) is linked to having bonds of longer duration. Some researchers argue that more highly educated people have a higher chance of short-lived nonkin relationships because of their increased likelihood of mobility; other researchers, however, contend that more highly educated people have a higher chance of sustaining nonkin ties because they have resources for travel and modern communication. Klein Ikkink and Van Tilburg (1999) reported that the higher the socioeconomic status of an older adult, the more of a chance there is of relationships continuing. Klein Ikkink and Van Tilburg (1999) and Van Duijn et al. (1999) reported no effect on the duration of other relationships of either living with or without a spouse or partner. Some authors (Ferrand and Mounier 1996) have mentioned that women more frequently renew their network members than men do; other researchers have reported no gender differences in the duration of nonkin relationships (Klein Ikkink and Van Tilburg 1999; Van Duijn et al. 1999). Treiman (1985) showed that women's nonkin relationships are more likely to be interrupted because of moves caused by their partners' careers. Antonucci (1994) argued that women have better interpersonal skills than men and therefore are more likely to have longer duration nonkin relationships. Monsour

(2002) identified numerous social and structural barriers to cross-sex relationships in adulthood and old age, suggesting that such relationships are both less common and less likely to endure than same-sex ties.

Hypotheses

Because stable network members outside the circle of family members have seldom been the focal point of studies, our aim was to explore the characteristics of nonkin network members.

The first question we asked was, To what extent are (older) adults integrated in important nonkin relationships, and what are the descriptive characteristics, including duration, of these relationships? Our second research question was, What are key predictors of long-standing, important nonkin relationships? Attention was directed to network-disturbing (climbing the social ladder, moving to another place, divorce, and becoming widowed) and network-sustaining (having more nonkin network members at a short distance, having a car) factors, as well as other characteristics of a network (size, proportion of kin and nonkin, age and gender homogeneity), and of the older adults themselves. The third question addressed which of these predictors are central in the two societies. We expected U.S. relationships to be more transient and European relationships to be more enduring. Given the mobility and the sprawling nature of many U.S. communities, we expected that people living in the United States would need to travel longer distances to maintain contacts with network members, compared with Europeans. Finally, we expected U.S. compared with Dutch respondents to report higher proportions of their network members as being friends. We summarize our expectations as follows:

1. The core of a personal network will encompass the most highly valued network members: first, family and other kin and second, nonkin.
2. Although friends are associated with long-term involvement and shared histories, neighbors' functioning is connected to changes in living situations. Consequently, we expected the mean duration of friendships to be longer than relationships with neighbors.
3. The mean duration of nonkin relationships will be related to age and the age and gender homogeneity of a network. Moreover, nonkin relationships will be more long-standing when people are supported with network-sustaining factors and not confronted with network-disturbing factors.
4. Respondents from the United States, compared with respondents from the Netherlands, will report (a) higher proportions of friends in their core networks, (b) shorter mean durations for their nonkin relationships, and (c) a higher proclivity to travel long distances to meet with nonkin relationships.

Data and Methods

Samples

Large-scale studies of the duration of relationships are rare. We were fortunate to have two such studies that are comparable, asking very similar questions of U.S. and Dutch respondents. The studies were done at different times and involved different cohorts of adults. Given that individualization, with its attention to broader ranges of human bonds than the family, started earlier in the United States, it is good to compare an older U.S. survey (1977) with a later Dutch survey (1992) rather than comparing both countries in the 1990s.

Dutch respondents. This study used data from the Dutch NESTOR–Living Arrangements and Social Networks survey (Knipscheer et al. 1995). In 1992, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 4,494 respondents, constituting a stratified random sample, selected from the registers of 11 municipalities, of men and women aged 55 to 89 years. The response rate was 62%. The sample can be considered representative of the older population of the Netherlands.

American respondents. The Northern California Community Survey (Fischer 1982), conducted in 1977, included 1,050 randomly selected adults aged 16 to 91 years. The sample was drawn from communities varying in size, but towns under 2,500 in size were excluded. Interviews were completed with 75.8% of the eligible respondents. The sample was generally representative of the population on key demographic characteristics. For this study to be comparable with the Dutch sample, we selected respondents aged 55 years and older ($n = 225$).

Measures

In the NESTOR study, the key question for constructing the dependent variable was “How many years have you known . . .?” A comparable question was asked in the U.S. study. Given the response, the average length of time that respondents had known nonkin members was computed. The studies had several background variables in common: educational level, measured in years of education (range = 5 to 17 for the United States; range = 5 to 18 for the Netherlands), and marital status.

Network identification. To delineate respondents’ social networks in the NESTOR survey, the following question was asked: “Name the persons

with whom you are in touch regularly and who are important to you.” Network members were classified as partners, children, siblings, other relatives, neighbors, friends, and other nonkin. In the next step, a maximum of 12 network members per respondent were selected for in-depth investigation, prioritizing the network members with whom the respondents had the most frequent contact. Basic information about the top 12 network members included their relationships to respondents, gender, ages, marital status, length of time known, and distances from respondents. This article is based on the 3,229 respondents who had at least 1 nonkin network member named in the top 12.

In the northern California study (Fischer 1982:145), interviewers elicited the names of key network members via six question sequences that pertained to visiting or going out socially, discussing hobbies, discussing personal matters, giving advice, lending money, and watching the house. An illustrative sequence is “Sometimes people get together with others to talk about hobbies or interests they have in common. Do you ever do that? (If yes): Whom do you usually do this with?” After interviewers had lists of each respondent’s network members, they picked the first name given in response to each question, excluding household members, until they had a maximum-sized set of five. These five network members were classified as relatives, friends, neighbors, or others. The number of respondents aged 55 years and older with complete information was 222.

Other network characteristics. A small number of years since the latest move served as an indicator of a network-disturbing variable. The California study had multiple measures of mobility, and a change in living unit was used; we calculated years lived in the current location. Network-sustaining variables in both studies included the availability of a vehicle (in the household), the proportion of nonkin living within 5 minutes’ traveling distance, and the proportion nonkin at more than 60 minutes’ distance. General network characteristics included the total size of the network, the proportion nonkin as related to total size, the proportion of friends and the proportion of neighbors among the top nonkin members, as well as the mean frequency of contacts with nonkin. The frequency indicator in the NESTOR study ranged from one (*never*) to eight (*daily contact*). In the northern California study the scale ranged from one (*less than once a year*) to seven (*more than once a week*). Homogeneity between the respondents and network members was described through mean age deviation and the proportion of same-sex relationships.

Key Findings

Demographic and Network Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 presents characteristics of the samples used. The social integration of older adults is represented in the characteristics of the top nominations of the social networks. The proportion of nonkin among the top nominations was 42% for Dutch respondents and 66% for U.S. respondents. So, both kin and nonkin were important components of the respondents' networks. Among the nonkin, the percentages who were friends were 22% for Dutch respondents and 56% for U.S. respondents. So, the U.S. respondents reported higher proportions of their nonkin network members as being friends, as hypothesized. The percentage of neighbors among nonkin was about 40% for both countries. The mean frequency of contacts with nonkin was twice per month for U.S. respondents and four times per month for Dutch respondents. Older adults had long-standing relationships. The mean duration of friendships was longer by roughly 50% than the mean duration of neighbor relationships. This finding held across both nations.

Network homogeneity. The mean age difference between respondents and nonkin top nomination network members (friends, neighbors, colleague volunteers), was about 12 years, in both the Netherlands and the United States. As explored more fully in a related article (Uhlenberg and de Jong Gierveld 2004), this age difference between respondents and nonkin network members is usually larger for older than for younger respondents. The proportion of same-sex relationships out of all the nonkin relationships, the second indicator of network homogeneity, exceeded the proportion of cross-sex relationships: 68% of the Dutch respondents' and 69% of the U.S. respondents' nonkin relationships were same sex, and 32% of the Dutch respondents' and 31% of the U.S. respondents' nonkin relationships were cross sex. Again, the trend was the same in both countries.

Network-sustaining and network-disturbing variables. Many nonkin lived within a 5- or 60-minute commute and had fairly frequent contact with the respondents, more than twice a month. The percentage ever divorced among older adults was much higher in the United States than in the Netherlands. The percentage of widowed older adults was more or less comparable in both countries.

Table 1 illustrates some cultural differences between the two samples: U.S. respondents less frequently lived in large cities, had more years of

Table 1
Demographic and Network Characteristics of Dutch and U.S.
Respondents Aged 55 Years and Older (means and percentages)

Variable	The Netherlands (<i>n</i> = 3,229)	United States (<i>n</i> = 222)
Background characteristics		
Mean age	71.7	66.3
Proportion living in large cities	53.1	36.4
Mean years of education	8.8	12.4
Proportion church members	62.6	87.1
Network disturbing		
Proportion divorced	4.8	12.5
Proportion widowed	29.5	26.2
Proportion never married	6.3	4.0
Mean years since last move	19.3	13.3 ^a
Network sustaining		
Proportion with car in household	55.6	74.7
Proportion of nonkin within 5 minutes' traveling distance	56.1	33.7
Proportion of nonkin more than 60 minutes' traveling distance away	7.3	4.2
Characteristics of top-nominations		
Proportion nonkin in top nominations	41.8	65.8
Proportion friends in nonkin	22.0	56.0
Proportion neighbors in nonkin	41.5	40
Mean frequency of contacts with nonkin	Weekly	1 per 1 to 2 weeks
Mean years of friendships	28.5	18.0
Mean years of neighborships	18.4	13.0
Network homogeneity		
Mean years of age deviation re nonkin	12.0	11.9
Proportion same-sex nonkin	68.0	69.0

a. Years interpolated.

education, were more frequently church members, had moved to new locations more recently, and were more likely to have access to cars than was the case for Dutch respondents. There were cultural differences in network composition, too: Dutch respondents had a noticeably higher proportion of kin among the top nominations in their networks. Among the nonkin, the Dutch respondents had lower proportions of friends. Dutch respondents had larger proportions of their nonkin network members who lived within a five-minute distance. The mean duration of nonkin relationships in the Netherlands was longer than those of U.S. nonkin relationships. These findings held for friends as well as for neighbors.

Multivariate Analysis

The results of a hierarchical regression analysis for the Netherlands and the United States are shown in Table 2. Controlling for age and sex, we found that respondents who did not live in large cities in the Netherlands, and those who did live in large cities in northern California, as well as those with low levels of education (model 1) were more likely than others to have longer durations of nonkin relationships. Adding network-disturbing and network-sustaining variables to the equation (model 2) increased our ability to predict the duration of nonkin relationships from 4% to 17% for the Dutch sample and from 4% to 31% for the U.S. sample. The divorced and widowed older adults were characterized by shorter mean durations of the nonkin relationships (significant in the Netherlands, not significant in the United States). Being never married was significantly related to duration in the United States but not in the Netherlands. Those who continued to live in a particular place had a higher likelihood of long nonkin durations than older adults who had moved recently, both in the Netherlands and in the United States. Duration was negatively associated with the proportion of nonkin network members within 5 minutes' traveling distance (significant for older adults in the Netherlands, not significant for older adults in the United States) and positively related to the proportion of relationships at travel distances of more than 60 minutes (significant in the Netherlands, not significant in the United States), indicating that long-standing nonkin relationships had successfully survived the moving of one of the relationship partners to another place. Additionally, having a car was associated with longer durations of nonkin relationships (significant in the United States, not significant in the Netherlands). Apparently, those with cars in the United States are better able to continue contacts with nonkin after moving.

The characteristics of the top nominations in the social network, included in model 3, increased the explained variance to 29% for the Netherlands and 36% for the United States. More friends among the nonkin as well as less frequent contacts with nonkin were indicators that increased our predictability of longer durations of nonkin relationships. Density among network members (e.g., how many of one's network members had relationships with one another) was associated with longer average durations of nonkin network relationships in the United States. The age homogeneity of the network members was associated with longer durations of nonkin relationships (significant for the Dutch respondents, not significant for the U.S. respondents). This finding is consistent with the idea that "old" friends, originating from young adulthood, and student days in particular, are long-standing friends because the relationships are grounded in shared

Table 2
Outcomes of Hierarchical Regression Analysis on Duration of Nonkin Relationships
in the Top Network Nominations (the Netherlands $n = 3,229$, United States $n = 222$)

Variable	The Netherlands			United States		
	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)
(Constant)						
Age on day of interview	.14***	.18***	.23***	.07	-.01	.02
Sex (male/female)	-.04*	-.01	-.07***	-.14*	-.11 [†]	-.16*
Living in large cities	-.12***	-.13***	-.11***	.19**	.11 [†]	.12*
Education in years	-.04**	-.07***	-.06***	-.07	-.17**	-.13*
Church membership	.01	.02	.01	-.06	-.12*	-.08
Network disturbing						
Ever divorced		-.08***	-.05**		.02	-.00
Ever widowed		-.05*	-.03		-.06	-.08
Never married		.00	.04*		.17**	.13*
Years since last move		.29***	.31***		.49***	.47***
Network sustaining						
Car in household		.04	.02		.13*	.08
Proportion nonkin within 5 minutes' traveling distance		-.13***	.01		-.06	-.05
Proportion nonkin more than 60 minutes' traveling distance away		.14***	.07***		.09	.09

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Variable	The Netherlands			United States		
	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)	Model 1 (β)	Model 2 (β)	Model 3 (β)
Top-nominations						
Total network size			.02			.06
Proportion nonkin			-.10***			.02
Proportion friends in nonkin			.14***			.28*
Proportion neighbors in nonkin			-.05*			.24*
Frequency of contacts with nonkin			-.14***			-.10
Density			—			.21***
Network homogeneity						
Age deviation			-.26***			-.09
Proportion same-sex nonkin			.05**			.03
Adjusted R^2	.04	.17	.29	.04	.31	.36

Note: Dash indicates no data available.
* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$, [†] $p < .10$.

life histories. Another interesting finding in model 3 is that it was especially the same-sex, nonkin relationships that were an important factor behind long-term durations (significant in the Netherlands, not significant in the United States). In this model, never-married older adults in both countries were characterized by a significantly higher likelihood of maintaining long-standing nonkin relationships. This is in line with the findings of Wagner, Schütze, and Lang (1999) that singles are most likely to mention long-standing friendships in their networks.

Comparing the results for the Netherlands and the United States, some cultural contrasts are worth noting. The first is the association between community size and the average duration of the nonkin relationships (negative in the Netherlands but positive in the United States). This difference masks a curvilinear relationship between community size and the duration of nonkin relationships in the United States whereby suburbanites in medium-sized communities had relationships of short duration. In both countries, however, residents of small communities had long-duration nonkin relationships. The second difference is that owning an automobile was associated with longer durations of nonkin relationships in the United States but not in the Netherlands. The third contrast is that the network composition in terms of kin and various subcategories of nonkin had different consequences in the Netherlands and in the United States for the duration of nonkin relationships. For instance, the proportion of neighbors in the Netherlands was modestly related to having a shorter average duration of the network of nonkin, whereas in the United States, the proportion of neighbors was related to longer average durations of nonkin relationships. Although this finding is somewhat surprising, in the United States, having numerous neighbors in one's network is associated with residential stability, which gives a chance for these relationships to continue for long periods.

Discussion

Networks, Duration, and Social Embeddedness

The size and composition of a social network is directly affected by important transitions during the life course and depends also on the duration of a given life phase. This research investigated differences in durations of nonkin relationships, insofar as important personal relationships (top nominations) are concerned. The durations of important relationships are

affected by the norms and standards of the society in which one is involved. Differences between North America and Europe were expected, on the basis of contrasts in orientation toward individual achievement compared with an emphasis on continuing social integration and a hesitation to rebuild a network of friends and other nonkin, respectively.

Support for the Hypotheses

The outcomes indicate that nonkin are named as important network members in both settings. Nonkin form a minority of all members in the core of Dutch respondents' networks, but the share of nonkin is nevertheless over 40%. In the northern California data set, nonkin outnumbered kin as network members. In the United States, friends in particular are a higher proportion of nonkin relationships than in Europe. However, in both countries, pathways to social integration encompass long-standing intimate friendships with less than weekly contacts: "sleeping contacts," but contacts that are definitively activated when help is needed.

The duration of bonds with nonkin differs between friends and other nonkin in both countries, as expected. The mean duration of friendships among older Dutch adults proved to be more than 28 years, a good basis for shared histories. The mean duration of contacts with neighbors named as important network members proved to be 18 years. The comparable figures for older adults in the United States were 18 years for friends and 13 years for neighbors. We interpret these findings as supportive for the long-term integration of adults.

The level of education is inversely related to the duration of nonkin relationships. This finding is consistent with the statement that highly educated people have a greater chance of the discontinuation of nonkin relationships because of higher mobility. The network-disturbing factors worked as hypothesized: Moving to another place or having been confronted with divorce or widowhood decreased the mean duration of one's nonkin relationships, be it significantly or not significantly (Wellman et al. 1997). Apparently, the impact of changes in marital and partner status on the duration of relationships with nonkin is more pronounced in the Netherlands, where divorce is considerably less common (Brehm et al. 2002:372) than in the United States. In the domain of the network-sustaining factors, the availability of a car in the household proved to be more decisive for the respondents in the United States than for the adults in the Netherlands. The fine-tuned public transport systems in Europe compared to the more car-oriented standards in the United States might be important factors behind

this difference. Moreover, a lower frequency of contacts and a small age deviation between respondents and nonkin network members increases the likelihood of long-standing relationships in both samples (significant in the Netherlands, not significant in the United States).

This research has pointed out that many aspects of the functioning of the convoy are parallel in both regions. Friendships and neighbors are important to adults, on the basis of the varying functions of both types of relationships. Adults who manage to build personal networks including long-standing relationships with friends, neighbors, and others enhance their personal integration in society (see also Thomése, Van Tilburg, and Knipscheer 2003). Building such ties seems to ensure the social cohesion and structural embeddedness (Feld 1997) of younger and older adults.

Do national differences on predictor variables explain national duration differences? On key predictors of duration (e.g., moving to a new residence), the Dutch and U.S. respondents differ. The older age, greater geographical stability, and lower educational levels of the Dutch may partially explain why they have longer lasting nonkin relationships. One exception to this pattern is that having a car, a duration-sustaining factor, is more common in the United States, where relationships are of shorter duration. Of the forces leading to the longer duration of nonkin relations, however, having an automobile accounts for only a small part of the variance.

Methodological Issues

Differences in the methodology and samples across the two studies may confuse the interpretation of outcomes. The relatively small number of older adults aged 55 years and older in the U.S. sample reduced the generalizability of the findings and the power of the statistical analysis. Yet the methodological differences between the two studies also have a positive side: They give greater confidence in the robustness of the findings. In the future, obviously, it would be desirable to have a single, multinational study designed primarily to investigate duration.

Moreover, both studies relied on cross-sectional research. So, the set of network members investigated can only be referred to as a personal network drawn from a larger "underlying network." Some of the network members drawn will not be found at other points in time, as they become inactive. In this study, we concentrated on the core of most frequently contacted network members. In doing so, we had a certain guarantee that this core would consist of the closest of the important long-standing ties.

Implications for Policies and Programs

The number of years since one's last move is a strong correlate of relationship duration. Policies might minimize the impact of such moves. Programs that help people maintain contacts following moves would be helpful. At the meso-level, the persistence of relationships may be promoted, for example, by class reunions and veterans getting together. In the Netherlands, reduced bus fares in nonpeak hours help people living in different areas maintain their ties.

To sum up, in response to our three questions, we conclude that (1) most older adults have inner cores of nonkin network members of long-standing duration; (2) many factors contribute to the duration of nonkin relationships, chief among them years since people last moved; and (3) many predictors of the duration of nonkin relationships operate in a similar manner in both the United States and the Netherlands, but a few culture-specific associations were found (e.g., the greater importance of cars in the United States). The slightly lower frequency of contact with long-standing nonkin relationships suggests that these ties may at times have the quality of being "sleeping" bonds: important yet not necessarily activated. Our view, nonetheless, is that long-standing bonds are a crucial ingredient for the well-being of individuals and an essential element in the mortar of society as a whole.

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